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THE MERIT SYSTEM IN MUNICIPALITIES

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THE MERIT SYSTEM IN MUNICIPALITIES

We often hear the statement made in public or see it in print that the great problem of the day is the municipal problem. I wonder if we know just what this means? If we turn to the dictionary we are told that a "problem is a question for discussion and settlement; a matter of uncertainty requiring further light to determine the truth." So when we speak of the great problem of the day, we mean a great question which is before the people for discussion and settlement; a great matter of uncertainty requiring further light to determine its truth.

Why should the municipal problem be considered a great one? Why should it require discussion and consideration and further light? First because it affects or touches so many people. James Russell Lowell once said that any question which affected the welfare of thousands and hundreds of thousands, no matter how trivial in itself, acquired dignity and importance. Now when we come to talk about cities and their management, we at once begin to talk of figures so big as to be beyond the understanding of most of us who have never counted over 5,000 at any one sitting, if we have reached so far. Perhaps we can form some idea of how cities have grown in size and importance when we say that in 1790 when the first census or counting of the American people was taken, three people out of every hundred or thirty out of every thousand lived in cities. Now according

to the last census or counting, that of 1900, thirty-three people out of every hundred or three hundred and thirty out of every thousand lived in cities. If we should count the people who live in the suburbs of the cities, those doing business in the city and sleeping in the country, then we would find that nearly one-half of the people of this country, and there are 76,000,000 of them, should be considered as making up the city population.

Perhaps we can get at an understanding of what the cities are by stating that there were more people living in Greater New York in 1900 than were living in the United States at the time we elected our first President; or to take another illustration: —

In 1900 there were 8,704,017 people living in eight of the leading cities of this country, or nearly as many as were living in the whole country in 1820, when the country was almost half a century old. It is only when we compare the present day figures with those of an earlier day and generation that we can appreciate what the urban or city population is.

We get an insight into the importance of the city by taking a simple illustration, such as was given by Mr. Horace E. Deming a year or two ago. He said, "When a trail has become a cart road, the cart road a highway, the highway a constantly travelled and closely thronged city street, the proper maintenance and care of the latter is an administrative problem of the greatest importance to thousands, and it may be to hundreds of thousands."

The care of a trail through the woods or forest was a matter of small importance and to a few people only. The care of that trail when it became a cart road was not a matter of much more importance; but when it became a highway, travelled by hundreds every week, then it was; and when it became a city street, used by thousands every day, it needed the constant care and attention of trained men. Then it became, as Mr. Deming says, "an administrative problem of the greatest importance."

That is to say, the matter of caring for it and of keeping it in good repair, was a question of importance, because it affected the welfare of thousands and hundreds of thousands of people.

I might multiply illustrations by taking up such matters as that of supplying cities with water, light and police protection; but they all teach the same thing, that the great numbers involved make the question important, as do the extent of territory covered and the services rendered.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, when our federal government was founded, no city had attained to the dignity of 50,000 inhabitants. Philadelphia was the first city and it had only 42,520 population. Greater New York now employs a greater number than that, its pay roll containing over 50,000 men and women. Think of what that means! New York now requires more people to carry on its government than resided in the largest city of the United States in 1790!

When we consider a city government which involves the services of 50,000 men and the welfare of 4,000,000 people, or to take some of the other cities. where the armies of officeholders range from 2,000 to 8,000 and where the people affected run from one-fourth of a million to nearly two millions, as in the case of Chicago, we ask ourselves what principle should we follow in appointing them?

Tammany Hall in New York and the "machine" in Philadelphia and other cities insist upon regarding them as spoils of office. That is to say, that these offices, so great in number and so important in the services they are called upon to render, are to be used to pay political and personal debts. They are to be used in place of money or other valuable things to pay somebody for favors granted or to come.

Let us state the question a little differently. Policemen are to be appointed, not because they are good thief takers and can preserve order, but because they can or will control or have controlled a certain number of votes; firemen are to be appointed,

not because they know how to put out fires, but because they are related to some one who has done a favor or is expected to do one to the machine; clerks are to be appointed because they belong to the party in power, not because they can write and figure well. The question of fitness to do the public work is not considered; the question of political usefulness to the machine is.

Imagine for an instant, if you can, the Pennsylvania Railroad, with its great interests, although not comparing in extent with those of the leading cities of the country, selecting its engineers, firemen, conductors, brakemen, and clerks upon any other basis than that of fitness! What would we say if the superintendent of one of the divisions of that railroad, in looking for two assistants, found two in every way capable, but who happened to be Republicans, and then refused to appoint them because their politics did not happen to be the same as his, and selected two inferior men because they were of his way of political thinking? Would the stockholders of the Pennsylvania Railroad, even though fifty-five per cent might be of the same party as the superintendent, tolerate such conduct? To ask these questions as to a railroad or other corporation is to answer them, if they are not too absurd for attention. And yet just such a condition does prevail in our municipalities in respect to municipal offices, and just such practices create the municipal problem and bring our cities and their governments into disrepute. Men have been appointed to clean streets because they were Democrats or Republicans, and for similar reasons have been chosen clerks and janitors and surveyors and firemen and engineers. Their partisan affiliations and usefulness have been the first consideration for their appointments. Their usefulness to the public has been of secondary importance, if considered at all. This is the spoils system.

The next step after appointing men because of their politics and their political usefulness is to organize them into a compact body to carry on the system.

It leads directly to what we call the "bread and butter brigade" in Philadelphia, an army of 10,000 men, or ten to an election division, who march shoulder to shoulder and fight battle after battle at the primary and general elections, to keep their positions and sustain a system which puts their selfish ends before the public good.

Society is built up on the voluntary sacrifices of a few that the many may live and prosper. When our land and its government are in danger men volunteer to serve in its army and navy, that their country may be protected. They are willing to sacrifice their lives that the country may live. The spoilsman proceeds on the reverse principle, and so he is in truth an enemy of his country. He insists that a man shall be appointed to serve his ends, to help him in his ambitions. Men in public service are known as Croker's men, Quay's men, Lorimer's men, Cox's men. How seldom do we hear the good old-fashioned "public servant!"

In Philadelphia, when the present mayor went into office, he removed good men and true, who had been for years serving the public. Had they lost their ability or their experience and usefulness? No, they were all in the prime of life and at the height of their usefulness. Why, then, were they removed or forced to resign? Simply because they would not become Ashbridge men, or because their places were wanted by Ashbridge men.

The life of Colonel Waring is to be charged up to the spoils system. If he had not been replaced by a Tammany politician as Superintendent of Street Cleaning in New York he would not have accepted the Cuban appointment, and so would not have contracted that dread disease which ended his life. Why was Colonel Waring replaced? Not because he did not know how to clean streets, because no man had ever done the work better. Not because he was less honest or efficient, but simply and solely because he was not a Tammany man.

The Greater New York Republican Convention was right when it declared, after nominating Seth

Low for mayor in 1901, that "The great city is a great business corporation. There should not be such a thing as a Republican or a Democratic way of cleaning the streets, or collecting the taxes, or arresting the pool-room and dive keepers; and it makes no difference whether a man is a Republican or a Democrat, when his duties are to manage the police department, to conduct the finances, or to supervise the whole municipal administration."

In short, men should be selected for office because they merit the appointment; because they can do what the duties of their office require them to do, to the advantage of the public; and without any consideration of their politics or religion or their private relationships except as these indicate their character and training. This, in short, is the merit system, wherein merit and not "pull" or special favor or political usefulness is the basis of appointment.

In these days the value of a professional training is everywhere recognized and in every department of activity, except that of government. It is based upon a recognition of the fact that the execution of a policy or its administration is a matter to be committed into the hands of trained men. To go back to the Pennsylvania Railroad for an illustration, it is a matter of policy, to be determined by the directors, whether a road shall be built between two cities; but engineers are given charge of the actual construction of the road, and they select the men who know how to build the road. The engineers do not select their assistants and helpers on the basis of their religious or political beliefs; they only ask that they be honest and capable. The other matters are irrelevant, and so it must come to be with the execution of municipal enterprises; and fortunately an increasing number of men and women are coming to look at the whole matter in this light. The reasons for this are not far to seek. The city is becoming a constantly increasing factor in our lives. Each year it becomes of more importance, because it touches us at more points. For

years national affairs were given first place in the consideration of the average citizen. This has been shown time and again by the size of the vote at elections where national questions were involved, as compared with those where state or municipal ones were at issue. The interest, as shown by the vote, decreased from national to state and thence to city, so that at times the vote at those elections where only local issues were involved was shamefully small and insignificant. This condition of affairs is gradually yielding to one where a more rational view prevails, and we see citizens giving more and more attention to those affairs which they are realizing affect them most directly of all.

James C. Carter, for years the acknowledged leader of the American Bar, in a recent address before the National Municipal League, of which he has been the president since its organization in 1894, clearly set forth the basis for this change of feeling: —

"If I should compare the importance of national politics, if I may so call them, the importance of a proper control of national affairs with that of municipal affairs, I should say that the former were less important, *almost like dust in the balance, compared with the latter.* In national affairs, whichever party is elected, the business of the country, the administration of its affairs goes on in about the same way. You would scarcely know the difference; but in municipal affairs, the moment degeneracy begins it is felt in every corner of your civil and political life. The moment unscrupulous men get possession of your municipal offices and turn them to their own purposes, your schools begin to suffer degradation, the pavement of your streets is affected, the cleanness of your city is gone, your police come into alliance with crime and you are threatened with every sort of danger, and there is no form of social or political life in which you do not instantly feel the result. It is for this reason that I cannot help thinking that attention to municipal affairs is vastly more important in immediate results than any at-

tention to national politics, although I would by no means disparage the latter."

In other words, in the opinion of this distinguished man, now long past his three score and ten and with an experience of fifty years and more in the practice of the law before the highest tribunals in the land, yes, in the world, for he was counsel for the United States before a recent international court of arbitration, these municipal questions are of greater importance than the national issues, which take up so much space in the newspapers and occupy so much of public attention. The reason is not far to seek. Municipal government has to do with such matters as light and water within the house, its protection from thieves and fires without. It has to do with the streets we walk upon and the cars we ride in; with our education and our recreation. Whether young or old, rich or poor, indoors or out, at work or play, all come in touch with the municipal government in some form or another, every day in the year. Except for the postman, how many of us have much, if any have business with the national government?

A few months ago a former captain of police in Philadelphia came into my office, at my request, to tell his story. He had been dismissed from the force to make way for a new captain. Why? Was he less efficient as a policeman? No, but he had been a policeman so long, he had ceased to be politically useful and he had to make way for a new man, who had more of a pull and knew more of politics. Think of school teachers being selected because of the politics of their brothers and fathers; and clerks appointed because they are Republicans or Democrats. We might just as well select our doctors or lawyers because of their politics. Or to put it another way: Suppose boys and girls were admitted to school and promoted, not as they showed their fitness and because they merited it, but because their fathers were Republicans or Democrats and had a certain political pull! What would be said of such a system as that? And yet that is just

what is done in the municipal service. Men and women are admitted to it and promoted in it for other reasons than their merit and fitness.

We are told that when the statue of the god Hermes, in Athens, had been mutilated by some vandal, the Athenians were frightened and furious; they felt that for a moment's pleasure or a stupid whim inevitable calamity would be brought upon all. Walter Bagehot, in commenting upon this incident, attributed this to the feeling that an injury to one was an injury to all. All suffered through the injury to one or inflicted by one.

In these days we do not regard the public welfare with that sacred reverence essential to its maintenance and highest development. In every direction we see a disregard of it on the plea that anything is good enough for the public. The municipal problem is primarily due to the failure to apply to the transaction of public business the same standards as are applied in private life. Public offices are spoils to be distributed among the victors. Public contracts are to be distributed as rewards to the favored. Public franchises are to be given to those who make the best *private* offers to the agents of the public for the time being.

Suppose the same spirit pervaded our modern municipalities as pervaded Athens when the statue of Hermes was mutilated. Tammany or the Philadelphia machine could not exist for a day. We would not tolerate for an instant the appointment of a single public official to pay a private or political debt; and this brings us to the fundamental argument for the merit system in municipalities: it is immoral to appoint men to office on any other basis than that of fitness or merit. Municipal government is too sacred a trust to have any portion of it used to pay private political debts or to have it diverted for personal or factional ends. Dr. Albert Shaw has stated the proposition in this way: — "The making of partisan appointments to office would be deemed in English towns not merely a blow at the efficiency of administration, but also a violation of

every principle of civic justice and equality, a proscription of half the taxpaying community by governing authorities, — in short, an act of hostility which carried on to its logical end would mean the denial or civic rights to all citizens not adhering to a single political party, or, in a word, civil war."

If an act of hostility, a denial of civic right, if civil war in England, why not in America? Is the spoils system unrighteous there and righteous here? Is it improper to use public offices as pawns on a political chess board there and right on this side of the Atlantic? Does the ocean change immorality into morality? To ask these questions is to answer them. The spoils system is wrong everywhere and in every way, because it proceeds on a wrong basis. It regards public office and public property as means to private ends. Whereas they should be everywhere and only considered as instruments to promote the public welfare.

This is not only the ethical, but also the legal view. A few years ago a West Virginia court declared that " The incumbent of an office has no property in it under our system of government. His right to exercise it is not based upon any contract or grant. It is conferred on him as a public trust, *to be exercised for the benefit of the public.* Such salary as may be attached to it is not given because of any duty on the part of the public to do so, but to enable the incumbent the better to perform the duties of his office by the more exclusive devotion of time thereto."

I might multiply instances of the absurdities of the spoils system, to show how it establishes a wrong principle in public life; how it denies the free and equal right of every man to serve his country, if he is fit to do so. Suppose when the Civil War was being fought out the government had said only Republicans will be accepted, only men who have served that party will be taken into the ranks, only men with a pull will have a chance. Every one would have denounced as absurd and treasonable such a policy; but wherein does it differ from the

spoils system, under which admission to the public service is denied to all except those who belong to the party in power and those who serve its ends or will? Further, I might show the hardships following the spoils system, how men are deprived of their places after years of faithful service, simply to make way for those politically more useful; but all to the same end — the spoils system is unwise and immoral.

The ills of such a system are appalling. They endanger the lives of our families, and they bring our government into disrepute and make men wonder whether Democracy is a failure.

The duty is incumbent upon every American citizen who loves his country to root out that which has brought such serious reproach upon us as a nation. Let us bear in mind those sturdy words of James Russell Lowell:

> "'I loved my country so as only they
> Who love a mother fit to die for may;
> I loved her old renown, her stainless fame,
> What better proof than that I loathed her shame?
> Never land long lease of empire won
> Whose sons sate silent when base deeds were done."

The merit system is the new morality. It places the "public good" above all else; above personal interests, above factional and partisan interests. Until the American people realize that "the newer morality demands that men should place the 'public good' above all other consideration," the merit system cannot be completely established. There must be no cessation of effort until the people realize and act upon their realization, that "the good of a part must, if necessary, be sacrificed to the good of the whole; that love of party must be subordinated to love of country; . . . that loyalty to neighbors must be forgotten if the public well-being is endangered or if it exacts the sacrifice."

One final word, and let that be from one who has rightly earned the reputation of being the foremost advocate of the merit system — Theodore Roosevelt,

President of the United States: — "The merit system of making appointments is, in its essence, as Democratic and American as the common school system itself, for it is simply one method of securing honest and efficient administration of the government, and, in the long run, the sole justification of any type of government lies in its proving itself both honest and efficient."

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